

Virginia Military Institute,
Superintendent's Quarters
North side of street bounding
north side of Virginia Military
Institute Parade Ground
Lexington (independent city)
Virginia

HABS No. VA-901

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE, SUPERINTENDENT'S QUARTERS

HABS No. VA-901

Location: On north side of street bounding north side of V.M.I. Parade Ground, Lexington, Virginia

Present Owner: State of Virginia

Present Occupant: General and Mrs. George R. E. Shell

Present Use: Home of the Superintendent of V.M.I.

Significance: "Davis's project for the V.M.I. was the first comprehensive one in the Gothic style actually to be built in this country ... The style differed radically from preceding academic buildings elsewhere in being almost wholly military ... This choice of Medieval military architecture for the new Institute in Virginia obviously set the tone for all later construction at West Point, at V.M.I. itself, and other such quasi-military schools." This is the only building in the original group that was not destroyed by General Hunter in 1864.
(Newton, Town and Davis, Architects)

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. This house was built for and has always been owned by the State of Virginia
2. Date of erection: started in 1860, finished in 1862
3. Alexander Jackson Davis, Architect
4. Original first floor plan and watercolor sketch of front elevation in Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

This building is called "Executive Mansion" on Davis's plans. Five drawings of preliminary studies of the first floor plans, two drawings of second floor plans, and one front elevation are owned by V.M.I. and are on deposit in the V.M.I. library.

5. Builders, Suppliers - unknown
6. Notes on alterations and additions:
1914 - House was dismantled and re-erected 104 yards northwest of original location. Original second-floor gallery around two-story entrance hall was eliminated by flooring over the open space and making a beamed ceiling over downstairs hall.

1924 - Extensive improvements were made under supervision of Carneal and Johnson, architects and engineers of Richmond, Virginia.

1931 - Administrative offices were moved from east wing of Superintendent's Quarters to Engineering Building. Rooms, thus vacated were converted to living quarters and a guest suite.

1954 - house was completely renovated, floors and walls strengthened, some wooden floors replaced. Fireproofing provisions were made at this time.

Numerous small changes have been made from time to time to carry out ideas of various occupants.

7. Historical events and persons associated with the structure. As the home of the head of this college, this building has been the scene of many social functions attended by internationally prominent dignitaries.
8. Sources of information:
Col. Wm. Couper 100 Years at V.M.I.
Newton, Town and Davis, Architects
Interview - Col. Carter Hanes, V.M.I. Business Manager

Prepared by Gillie Williams Campbell
February 27, 1969

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. House consists of basement, two stories, 1 room on third floor of each of two towers, 2 bays where octagonal rooms extend beyond front of building. Overall condition of fabric is excellent.

B. Technical description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: 119-1/2' wide, 28'8" deep
2. Foundations: Built in 1914 when house was moved to present location. Excavation went down to limestone rock. Hand-mixed concrete foundation walls, 2' thick.
3. Wall construction: brick above basement level, stuccoed (float finish), plastered inside. 17" thick. Walls are masonry covered with stucco. Rear of building is exposed brick, painted.

4. Porches: Front porch is 1 story high, extending between two bays, all wood and curved in plan. Supports are posts of wood, bracketed, handcarved detail. Rear porch is semi-circular, two story from basement level, second floor level opening off drawing room. Small porches off kitchen and dining room. All in excellent condition.
5. Six chimneys, all concealed.
6. All exterior doors and windows are probably original, white pine, painted. Shape and glazing of windows conform to Gothic style - diamond shaped panes.
7. Roof:
 - a. flat, built-up, pitch and slag on wings, towers, and portions of rear porch roof. Section over curved wall is tin.
 - b. Exposed cornice is worked into stucco with offset dentals supporting the parapets which contain embrasures and concrete coping. Crenellated parapet with concrete coping. All windows have pointed arch labels over them, triangular in section.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Stairways: one from basement to first floor, two from first to second floor, one in each tower from second to third floor. Simple turned spindle, two to a tread, handrail and newel walnut, octagonal newel.
2. Flooring: woodsubfloor on wood joists, over which was laid finish floor, tongue and groove, edge grain, face nailed. Floor probably not original.
3. Wall and ceiling finish - plaster on stud with wood lathes. Bearing walls are brick, plastered on inside, 13" thick. Cornice in drawing room is denticulated classic wood cornice. Classic wood cornices in west parlor also. Classic cornice with wall of Troy moulding in dining room. Fine Gothic cornice in library.
4. Library has wood bookcases, interior blinds, cabinets between windows. Parlor bay also has interior blinds.
5. Doorways and windows: six-panel doors, flat panels, 4-center pointed arch top, wood trim. Windows: double-hung sash, wood interior trim, diamond and rectangular panes. Double front door, half glazed, with lozenge panes, 2 flat panels below on each leaf about 12' high.
6. Hardware: doors have mortised locks, white china knobs, steel butts.

7. Heating: fireplace in every room originally. All fireplaces are still usable except those in guest suite (originally administrative offices) now closed up. Entire house now heated with steam, radiators.

D. SITE and Surroundings

The house was built originally about 104 yards south of its present location - when the parade ground was enlarged, the house was dismantled and re-erected facing the street which circles the parade ground. There are no outbuildings ... there is no record of the original planting.

Edited for HABS by Druscilla J. Null August, 1983

See also: Lyle, Royster, Jr. and Simpson, Pamela. The Architecture of Historic Lexington. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1977.